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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NICOSIA 000116

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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UNFICYP](#) [CY](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: SURPRISE, SURPRISE: INCUMBENT PAPADOPOULOS THE
FIRST-ROUND LOSER

REF: A. NICOSIA 114
[1](#)B. 07 NICOSIA 1006

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Schlicher, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Incumbent Republic of Cyprus President Tassos Papadopoulos failed February 17 to advance to the second round; instead, challengers Ioannis Kasoulides (DISY, center-right) and Dimitris Christofias (AKEL, left) will do battle February 24. News of Papadopoulos's defeat left Cyprus in mild shock, as nearly every pre-election opinion poll showed him leading the race. Reasons for the surprise outcome include the unreliability of Cypriot polling, the larger parties' superior cohesion and mobilization, Papadopoulos's overconfidence and inability to deliver a knockout blow in the debates, a larger-than-expected overseas vote, chinks in the President's control over media, and even local reaction to the impending Kosovo independence declaration. The Papadopoulos camp already is feeling offers for its still-significant vote haul, and likely will demand plum positions in the government in exchange for second round support. The Embassy will comment Septel on the impact of the hard-line President's departure on Cyprus Problem negotiations. END SUMMARY.

A Fait (Pas) Accompli

[1](#)2. (U) Of fifty-odd opinion polls published since the Cypriot presidential race hit full swing in late 2007, Papadopoulos led in all but one, a January 11 "Politis" (opposition) newspaper survey that gave Kasoulides a 0.2 percent advantage. Electoral law prohibited the publishing of polling data after February 10; the final tranche of surveys gave the President an advantage of between 0.5 and 2.4 percent over his nearest challenger; significant, but still within the margin of error. Most experts predicted an even closer race, since overseas Cypriot voters, amounting to perhaps four percent of the electorate and untallied in opinion polls, figured to favor Kasoulides or Christofias. A massive (9,300 voters surveyed) Cyprus Broadcasting Corporation exit poll gave Christofias the lead, albeit by a scant single point.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Despite inclement weather -- a rarity these days in drought-stricken Cyprus -- voter turnout reached historical norms at nearly 90 percent. There were no reports of verbal or physical clashes at polling stations, and results were tallied, transmitted, and announced in the capital Nicosia in record time. The outcome varied widely from most pollsters' predictions. Right-wing challenger Ioannis Kasoulides, whom most experts had dismissed as hopelessly mismatched last summer, scored a surprising first-round win with 33.5

percent. Christofias, at 33.3 percent, trailed by just 900 votes. Stunningly, incumbent Papadopoulos, whose campaign team had oozed such confidence that they refused to discuss losing, was sent home early with only 31.8 percent of the votes. Both winners trod the high ground in victory speeches to their faithful, praising Papadopoulos's service to Cyprus and promising to welcome his supporters into their ranks.

Reasons for the Loss? Not One, But Many

14. (C) Like pathologists carving a cadaver, Cypriot commentators and Embassy contacts rushed to conduct the Papadopoulos post-mortem. All agreed that a combination of factors underpinned the incumbent's surprising defeat. They included:

-- The Unreliability of Cypriot Polls: Anecdotally, we'd argue that few countries are as over-polled as Cyprus. Voters since January saw multiple surveys every week; to meet demand from TV stations, newspapers, and the candidates themselves, pollsters seemingly cut corners, such as restricting sampling to easy-to-contact groups like the elderly (who strongly favored Papadopoulos). Marketing company contacts also revealed that campaign staffs sometimes cooked the results to present better pictures of their respective candidate's electoral prospects (Ref B). Other Embassy interlocutors asserted that public servant and parastatal corporation employees' responses were unreliable, since many of them, fearing their responses could be compromised, instead voiced insincere support for the incumbent.

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-- High Turnout, High Cohesion Favors Challengers: Kasoulides's DISY and Christofias's AKEL are Cyprus's largest parties, typically garnering over 30 percent each in parliamentary elections. Papadopoulos's hopes depended on breaking their "syspeirosy," or cohesion, while maintaining that of his DIKO party and its allies EDEK, EUROKO, and the Greens. The alarm bells that sounded in both DISY and AKEL in January/February -- which showed Papadopoulos stealing over ten percent from each -- seem to have woken up local officials and the rank-and-file. DISY and AKEL contacts claimed the parties had worked day and night to rein in the turncoats. Unofficial election night results put AKEL cohesion at 90 percent, with DISY only slightly behind (but ahead of DIKO's 84). EDEK and EUROKO tallied only 70 and 67 points, however, far fewer that Papadopoulos required.

-- Chinks in Tassos's Media Armor: In meetings with challengers' staffs early in the campaign, all complained that the President enjoyed near-total control over the media. Not only could (and did) he influence substantive coverage to benefit his re-election, but Papadopoulos could prevent competitors from buying airtime, column inches, or even billboard space. His TV domination seemed particularly complete, with state broadcaster CyBC, Antenna, Mega, and Sigma all supporting the incumbent. In mid-January, however, we learned that media baron Costas Hadjicostis had broken from Papadopoulos in a fit of pique, and had informed his station, as well as newspaper Simerini and Radio Proto, "not to touch Kasoulides and Christofias." Also, opposition newspaper "Politis" turned up the heat on the incumbent the last month, daily documenting the administration's failings on the Cyprus Problem, worsening relations with Brussels, and domestic scandals.

-- Overseas Voters Arrive in Droves: Pollsters never sampled Cyprus's numerous overseas voters, the majority students residing in Great Britain and Greece. Early estimates put their numbers at 15,000, but that would rise to 22,000 shortly before the first round, comprising four-plus percent of the electorate. As DISY and AKEL youth branches

historically had dominated student elections in those countries, conventional wisdom held that Kasoulides and Christofias would enjoy a huge advantage with the diaspora. DIKO attempted to compensate by offering its supporters free rides home (the other parties covered approximately 75 percent). Confident Papadopoulos confidantes even claimed DIKO could win the overseas vote outright. Unofficial polling, however, showed the bigger parties prevailing with expats.

-- No Knockout Blow February 14: Despite an admirable economic record as President -- sticking solid technocrats in key government positions, turning a budget deficit into a surplus, and securing Cyprus's Eurozone entry -- Papadopoulos centered his re-election campaign on his effective stewardship of the Cyprus Problem. Neither opponent could be trusted withstand "suffocating pressure" from the Anglo-Americans for an imposed settlement, he boasted. Most pundits expected the President to score a big victory in the February 14 debate that dealt solely with the national topic. They got it wrong. While Papadopoulos avoided gaffes and showed his typical command of CyProb historical minutiae, he offered few way-forward specifics and failed to convince fence-sitters that only he could manage Cyprus negotiations.

-- Reeking of Confidence...or Arrogance?: Creating an impression of inevitability long featured high on the Papadopoulos team's to-do list. For instance, campaign manager George Lillikas, himself a professional pollster, insisted that any survey published contained not only a "how do you intend to vote" figure, but also a "who is likely to win" one, the latter always showing the President far in the lead. DIKO contacts, like party leader Marios Karoyian, so confidently predicted they were second-round shoo-ins that they refused even to speculate on how they might vote if they failed to advance. Such bravado suggests they may have left an electoral stone or two unturned -- lacking AKEL and DISY's grass-roots strength and organizational acumen, we doubt the party conducted similar door-to-door canvassing, for example. Health problems also forced Papadopoulos to scale back campaign appearances the last three weeks of the campaign (his spokesman claimed he suffered only from the flu, although opposition press alleged the president was suffering kidney failure).

-- On Kosovo, No Love from Moscow: Russia had provided Papadopoulos an electoral lifeline in December. Suffering a long series of foreign policy black eyes, from Syria

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initiating ferry service to "occupied" northern Cyprus, to the German parliament passing a Turkish Cypriot-friendly resolution, the President turned the tide when Russian Foreign Sergei Lavrov visited Cyprus in December. Lavrov seemingly read from Greek Cypriot talking points, and Papadopoulos boasted how Russia was watching Cyprus's back. It therefore stung sharply when Deputy PM Sergei Ivanov, commenting February 10 on Kosovo's imminent independence, asserted that, "if the EU (sic) recognizes Kosovo, it should also recognize Northern Cyprus." Days later, Vladimir Putin gave a similar rebuke to Europeans' alleged inconsistency vis-a-vis Kosovo and the north, forcing Papadopoulos into a lawyerly defense -- the Russian president actually was supporting the Republic with his commentary, he unconvincingly claimed. Regardless of Ivanov and Putin's intent, the end result here was that certain opinion leaders began questioning the solidity of Russia's support for Nicosia.

Willing to Listen to All Comers

15. (C) With the second round a short week away, the victors and the vanquished will engage in serious negotiations, trading support for government positions (Ref A).

Pro-government daily "Phileleftheros" reported February 18 that Papadopoulos had informed Karoyian that the two must jointly discuss DIKO's decision over whom to support. Karoyian allegedly was leaning DISY's way, having approached the right-wing party in the latter stages of the campaign (this clearly contradicts what Karoyian told the Ambassador February 14, when he claimed that pre-election contacts of that sort were "inappropriate.") Others in DIKO wanted to punish AKEL for dissolving the governing coalition in July 2007 and ushering in Papadopoulos's departure from office. Socialist EDEK, too, will face a tough decision -- align with ideologically similar AKEL and risk being absorbed into that much-larger party, or support DISY, a party it has criticized stridently since 2004.

Comment:

¶6. (C) Post will comment Septel regarding the likely effects of Papadopoulos's departure on Cyprus Problem negotiations. In general, pro-solution types on both sides of the Green Line are jubilant that 67 percent of Greek Cypriots voted "OXI" to Tassos Papadopoulos, turning the page on an ugly, divisive period in their history and, they hope, re-establishing their international reputation as a community genuinely committed to reunification of the island.
SCHLICHER